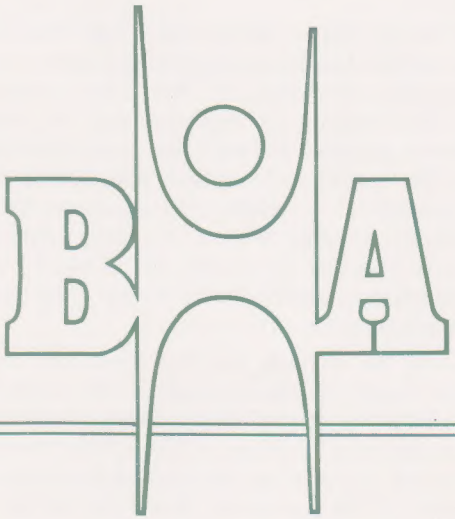
THE HUMANIST MOVEMENT



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THE HUMANIST MOVEMENT

THE ROOTS OF BRITISH HUMANISM

Modern British Humanism has its roots in the Ethical Societies that were formed towards the end of the 19th Century. Their main aim was to disentangle moral ideals from religious doctrines and thereby establish an ethical basis for social reform that would survive the steady decay of religious conviction in the community. This movement both enlisted the help of leading men and women in progressive causes and encouraged its own members to engage in public service.

In 1896 the Ethical Societies in England united to form the Ethical Union. The word "Humanism" was increasingly used to identify a certain outlook, not least by churchmen, and it came to stand for something in the public mind. In 1963 the Ethical Union joined with the Rationalist Press Association (a publishing company established in 1899) to form the British Humanist Association. An inaugural dinner was held in the House of Commons in May 1963 with Sir Julian Huxley, the first president, in the chair.

The Ethical Union (along with other Humanist organisations) had been accepted as a charity from its inception. However, in 1965 it was removed from the register of charities, and the other Humanist charities suffered the same fate soon after. The reason given was that "the advancement of Humanism" – unlike the advancement of Christianity or other religion – is not a charitable purpose. This was contested by the South Place Ethical Society, and in 1980 the High Court gave judgement in favour of Humanism.

Following this decision, the BHA applied for registration. Finally this was granted in 1982, with the Objects "(a) the mental and moral improvement of the human race by means of the advancement of Humanism, that is to say, the moral and social development of the community free from theistic or dogmatic beliefs and doctrines, and (b) the advancement of education and in particular the study of Humanism and the dissemination of knowledge of its principles". These aims are in line with those of the original Ethical Societies and are even more relevant to modern society.

POLICY AND ORGANISATION

The general policy of the BHA is decided by members voting at the Annual General Meeting. Membership is gained on agreeing with the Aims of the Association, and payment of an annual subscription. (The majority of members enhance this by signing a covenant form.) The BHA AGM is part of the Annual Conference which is usually held on a weekend in July and forms the highlight of the Humanist social year for those who attend. The Conference is residential and provides opportunities for debate and discussion in a convivial atmosphere as well as serious business.

Over the years a comprehensive policy statement has been developed and is embodied in a document called "Genstapol" (General Statement of Policy), which is periodically reviewed and revised to keep up with modern thinking.

Between AGMs the BHA is governed by an Executive Committee of members elected to serve a three-year term, while the day-to-day running of the Association's affairs is in the hands of a small committed staff.

The work of the Executive Committee is supplemented by various sub-committees and specialist working parties who deal with particular aspects of BHA concern. The most established of these is the Education Committee which has substantially affected the climate of national opinion on religious and moral education in schools over the years. Members are encouraged to support and to serve on sub-committees and working parties, particularly if they have specialist knowledge or experience.

LOCAL HUMANIST GROUPS

In many parts of the country there are local Humanist Groups. These are independent and self-governing, but they are encouraged to affiliate to the BHA or to become "associated". Each year there is a meeting of group representatives which has now acquired the nickname of "GRAM" (Group Representatives' Annual Meeting), which gives local group organisers an opportunity to compare notes and learn from each other. You do not have to be a BHA member to join a local group but many group members also subscribe to the national organisation.

ADVISORY COUNCIL

Continuing the Ethical Societies policy of enlisting leading public figures to help further progressive causes, the BHA has an Advisory Council of well known and influential people from all walks of life who are willing to lend their weight to furthering Humanist objectives.

OTHER NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST BODIES

The BHA is on friendly terms with other national Humanist organisations including the National Secular Society and the Rationalist Press Association. The BHA also set up the Humanist Housing Association and the Independent Adoption Society. The BHA is also affiliated to the International Humanist and Ethical Union, made up of Humanist organisation from other nations. The IHEU has consultative status on UNESCO, as a non-governmental organisation.